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ABSTRACT

This digest examines research on preschool programs that include children with and without disabilities. Recent research suggests that children with disabilities are able to take advantage of experiences that promote typical development. One study found that children with disabilities enrolled in integrated programs demonstrated higher levels of social play and more appropriate social interactions than children in self-contained special education preschool classes. Some research suggests that it is the type of learning experiences rather than the type of classroom setting (integrated or segregated) that fosters learning. Children with disabilities are more likely to initiate play activities and communications with peers in settings that use a child-centered rather than a teacher-directed approach. Integrated programs are also beneficial to children without disabilities. Some studies show that such children make developmental gains equivalent to their peers in nonintegrated programs, and that parents and teachers report that such children display less prejudice than their peers in nonintegrated programs. Successful integrated programs are characterized by an administrative emphasis on diversity. Successful programs also use naturalistic teaching approaches, through which intervention is provided within the context of naturally occurring activities. Activity-based intervention is one naturalistic teaching approach, the goal of which is to develop children's functional and generalizable skills. The task now before the early childhood community is to find ways of providing integrated education that is respectful of the needs of individual children, parents, and teachers. (BC)

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Integrating Children with Disabilities into Preschool

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These days, community preschool programs are increasingly likely to have at least one child with disabilities in their classes. Although providing early intervention to children with disabilities in an inclusive or integrated environment designed to meet the needs of *all* children is commonly regarded as best practice (Salisbury, 1991), concerns are sometimes raised about the ability of preschool programs to meet the needs of children developing normally as well as those with developmental delays. This digest examines research on preschool programs that include children both with and without disabilities.

Appropriateness for Children with Disabilities

An assumption in some early childhood special education programs is that children's disabilities prevent them from taking advantage of the experiences that promote typical child development. Recent research suggests that this assumption may not be valid. Lamorey and Bricker, for example, in a study of integrated programs (Peck et al., 1993, p.249-270), found that children with disabilities enrolled in integrated early childhood programs demonstrated higher levels of social play and more appropriate social interactions, and were more likely to initiate interactions with peers than children in self-contained special education preschool classes. Children with disabilities in integrated classes make gains in language, cognitive, and motor development that are comparable to peers in self-contained special education classrooms (Fewell & Oelwein, 1990).

Children with disabilities also display more advanced play in inclusive settings than they do in self-contained classrooms. However, Odom and Brown, in a discussion of social interaction skills interventions (Peck et al., 1993, p.39-64), note that even in inclusive settings, young children with disabilities are more likely to engage in noninteractive play, are less likely to participate in play groups, and are chosen as playmates less frequently than are their peers without disabilities.

Some research suggests that it is the type of learning experiences that are provided rather than the type of classroom setting (integrated or segregated) that is critical in fostering children's development. Mahoney and his colleagues (Mahoney & Powell, 1988; Mahoney et al., 1992) found that children with disabilities were more likely to initiate play activities and communications with their peers in settings where the adults displayed responsive and child-oriented teaching styles than in classes where adults used directed and instructionally oriented styles. Results of another study indicated that child-directed teaching strategies resulted in greater gains in communication skills for children with severe disabilities than did direct instruction (Yoder et al., 1991). The teaching practices described in these studies are compatible with developmentally appropriate teaching practices common in regular early childhood education programs.

Integrated Programs and Children without Disabilities

The results of several studies suggest that children without disabilities benefit from integrated classes that also address the needs of children with disabilities. Normally developing children enrolled in integrated programs make developmental gains at least equivalent to those made by their peers in nonintegrated programs (Odom & McEvoy, 1988).

Parents and teachers believe that integrated programs offer additional benefits for children without disabilities. Parents have reported that normally developing children enrolled in integrated settings displayed less prejudice and fewer stereotypes, and were more responsive and helpful to others, than were children in other settings (Peck et al., 1992). Teachers have reported that children without disabilities became increasingly aware of the needs of others when they were enrolled in a class including a child with a severe disability (Giangreco et al., 1993). While these findings are not based on direct observations but on teachers' and parents' perceptions, they emphasize the potential social benefits of integration for children without disabilities.

Administrative Structure of Integrated Programs

Administrative characteristics of successfully integrated programs, according to Peck, Furman, and Helmstetter as reported in Peck et al. (1993, p.187-205), are based on a philosophy that emphasizes the acceptance of diversity and that places value on the program's role in and participation in its community. The implementation of specialized interventions within naturally occurring situations without disrupting the curriculum and educational routines of the early childhood classroom was also an important factor in ensuring the success of an integrated program.

Peck, Furman, and Helmstetter found that the progress made by individual children in meeting developmental goals was not a critical factor in determining whether or not a program remained integrated. Rather, the major reasons integrated childhood programs did not survive (that is, became resegregated) were related to the struggles between professionals over issues such as management of time during the school day, types of classroom activities, and intervention strategies. In other studies, teachers emphasized the need for goals shared with special education and support personnel (Giangreco et al., 1993; Rose & Smith, 1993).

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Naturalistic Teaching Strategies

In addition to good administration, appropriate teaching strategies are an important component of a successfully integrated early childhood program. Recent research suggests that *naturalistic* teaching strategies provide an approach for implementing intervention within regular classroom routines (Bricker & Cripe, 1992). In naturalistic approaches, intervention is provided within the context of naturally occurring activities in the child's environment. *Activity-based intervention* is one such approach. (Although not discussed here, *milieu language teaching* and *transactional intervention* are other such approaches.) Naturalistic intervention strategies reflect practices grounded in theories of Piaget, Vygotsky, and Dewey, and complement the developmentally appropriate practice model used in early childhood classrooms. Naturalistic intervention illustrates the principle of nonintrusive individual instruction as applied in an integrated preschool classroom. The goal of activity-based intervention is to develop functional and generalizable skills. Functional skills are those that allow children to negotiate through their environments in ways that are satisfying and encourage independence, such as learning to request juice at snack time. Generalizable skills are those that can be practiced and used in many different settings (Bricker & Cripe, 1992).

In activity-based intervention strategies, teachers consider how children's goals can be included in each classroom activity. An activity such as snack time provides opportunities for working on eating independently (a self-help goal), pouring juice (a fine motor goal), and requesting a food item (a communication goal). Teachers are responsible for preparing an environment that is stimulating for all children, not just those without disabilities. Regular and ongoing evaluation of each child's progress in meeting individual goals is also a critical component of activity-based intervention and other naturalistic approaches.

Implications of Integrated Programs

Knowledge about the ways in which integrated programs can meet the needs of children and parents for high-quality early childhood education has grown significantly in the past 10 years. The active involvement of parents, regular and special education teachers, and administrators is now viewed as crucial in developing successful integrated preschool programs. Most regular education preschool teachers believe they are able to meet the needs of children with disabilities in their classes when intervention is supportive of their expertise and respects the educational approaches of the regular classroom.

New teaching strategies are being developed that meet the individualized needs of children with disabilities in inclusive classes. Researchers, parents, and practitioners are beginning to understand that participation in an inclusive preschool classroom influences nondisabled children's understanding of disabilities and sensitivity to their peers. The task now before the early childhood community is to find the best ways to provide education that is respectful of the talents and needs of individual children, parents, and teachers.

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